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*Ambassador in the dark*

## ADLAI STEVENSON AND THE BAY OF PIGS

Jack B. Pfeiffer

On 15 April 1961 nine B-26 bombers—painted and numbered like the B-26s of Fidel Castro's Air Force—departed CIA's forward operations base at Puerto Cabezas, Nicaragua on a strike mission against the three Cuban airfields which contained all of Castro's aircraft. Eight of the B-26s were to perform the combat mission. The ninth, with apparent battle damage, was to land in Miami, and the pilot was to claim to be one of the defectors from Castro's Air Force who were responsible for the attacks on the airfields. Control of the air was the *sine qua non* for the planned invasion to oust Castro's government. On 17 April—D-Day for the invasion at the Bay of Pigs—the B-26s were scheduled to complete the destruction of Castro's combat aircraft; to attack tactical targets including communications facilities, tank and artillery parks, and surface transportation; and to provide ground support for the invasion.

A few hours before the scheduled 17 April attack, President Kennedy, at the urging of Secretary of State Dean Rusk, canceled the D-Day strike against Castro's remaining combat aircraft and the tactical targets, and limited air operations to ground support in the immediate area of the troop landings. Cancellation of the tactical targets ensured the failure at the Bay of Pigs.\* Inexplicably, the bitterness of some CIA officers over the D-Day air strike cancellation came to focus on US Ambassador to the United Nations, Adlai Stevenson, rather than on President Kennedy or Secretary Rusk.<sup>1</sup> With regard to the Bay of Pigs failure, Stevenson was more sinned against than sinning; and the purpose of this paper is to put Stevenson's role in perspective.

By 1 April 1961, the US Government's anti-Castro plans had been over a year in discussion and were moving into the final stages. In theory, CIA's efforts to organize the anti-Castro Cubans into an effective military force to invade Cuba were secret. "Plausible deniability" was the official screen of both the Eisenhower and Kennedy administrations to hide US involvement. Even so, the press had tattered the cloak of deniability; and before the end of March 1961, Ambassador Stevenson faced increasingly hostile reception in the UN from anti-US elements.

In what was to have been a detailed briefing to prepare Stevenson for repercussions which would follow the initiation of operations, C. Tracy Barnes  
(b)(3)(c) was sent to New York City on

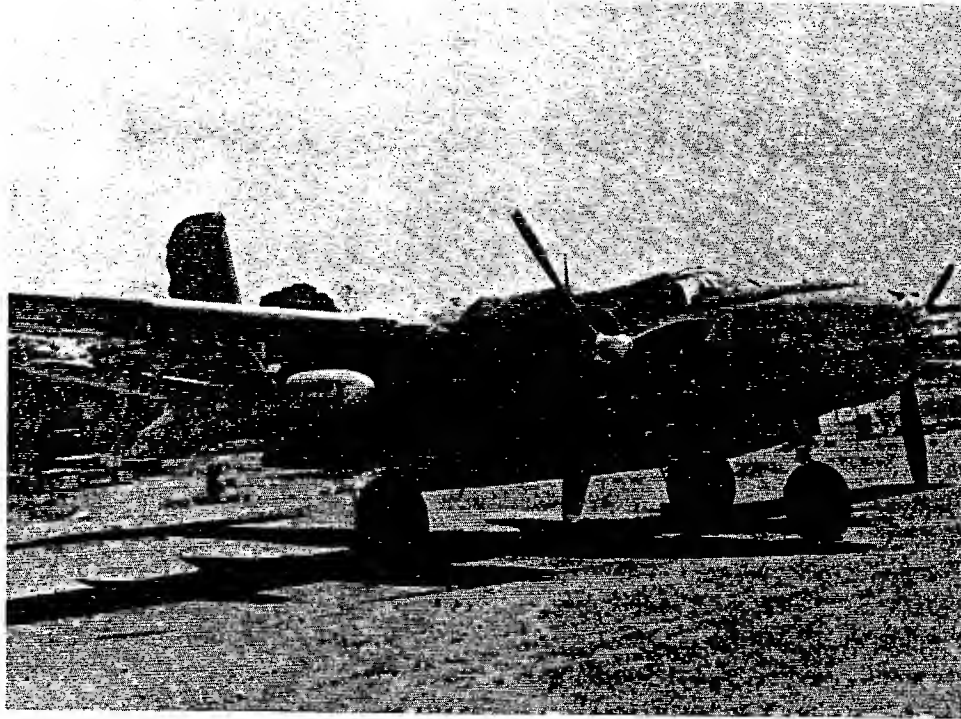
\* It is estimated that just before the air strike of 15 April, Castro's operational aircraft included four T-33s, six Sea Furies, and twenty B-26s. Castro subsequently claimed that on D-Day, 17 April, he had only six operational aircraft—two each of the above types. Within the next two days, an additional T-33 became operational. As CIA's air operations experts had warned, the brigade's B-26s were sitting ducks for Castro's small force of T-33s and Sea Furies.

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Armed B-26 at Puerto Cabezas . . . Battle damage visible on fuselage.

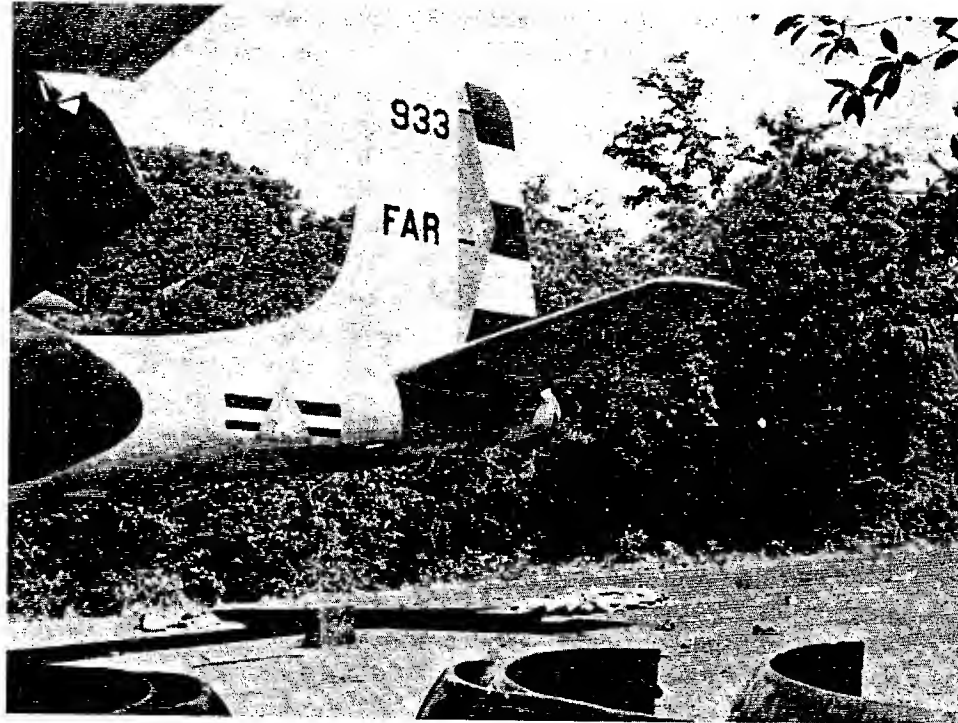
8 April to brief Stevenson. What Barnes *was instructed to tell* the Ambassador about the upcoming operation and *what he told him* has been the subject of much discussion. In his book, *A Thousand Days*, Arthur Schlesinger, who was then a member of the White House Staff, wrote:

In preparation for the [USUN Cuban] debate, Tracy Barnes and I had held a long talk with Stevenson on April 8 [1961]. But our briefing, which was probably unduly vague, left Stevenson with the impression that no action would take place during the UN discussion of the Cuban item. Afterward, when Harlan Cleveland, the Assistant Secretary for International Organizational Affairs, Clayton Fritchey of the United States Mission to the UN, and I lunched with Stevenson at the Century, he made clear that he wholly disapproved of the plan, regretted that he had been given no opportunity to comment on it, and believed that it would cause infinite trouble. But, if it was national policy, he was prepared to make out the best possible case.<sup>2</sup>

The question of exactly what Stevenson was or was not told became critical following the D-2 air strike against Cuba on 15 April 1961. Appearing in an emergency session of the UN Political and Security Committee on the afternoon of 15 April—a session that had been called at the request of Raul Roa, the Cuban Foreign Minister—Stevenson stated that the attack on the airfields had been conducted by defectors from Castro's Air Force (FAR). To support the defector story, Stevenson presented photographs of the B-26 that Mario Zuniga had landed in Miami. This fiction was quickly exposed because

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B-26 tail assembly bears Cuban insignia.

the photographs given to Stevenson showed a metal nose, rather than a plexiglass nose like those on Castro's B-26s. Of this incident, one observer of Castro's rise to power wrote:

A prominent victim of the air strike was Adlai Stevenson. . . . Ironically enough, . . . he was one of the few with some prior knowledge of the invasion project who was completely opposed to it. However, he was kept in the dark about the actual plans and so on the very afternoon of the [D-2] attack, in a verbal duel with Raul Roa at an emergency meeting of the United Nations Political Committee, he accepted as truth the misinformation he received from Washington.<sup>3</sup>

Charles Murphy, who (with CIA's blessing) wrote one of the few articles that was favorable to the Agency in terms of the Bay of Pigs operation, stated that after Stevenson's embarrassment of 15 April:

From that hapless moment on, Stevenson's role becomes unclear. There was a subsequent published report that he had intervened to block the second strike. Stevenson has flatly denied, and continues to deny, that he even knew about the second strike, let alone that he demanded it be called off.<sup>4</sup>

In a more critical vein, E. Howard Hunt, ex-CIA employee, would write:

It was later alleged that Stevenson had been kept in the dark about invasion preparations. In self defense, [C. Tracy] Barnes was to produce a record of his briefing of Ambassador Stevenson well prior

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to [the] invasion date. The Barnes-Stevenson memorandum was furnished Lyman Kirkpatrick, CIA's Inspector General at the time.<sup>5</sup>

Kirkpatrick, however, has no recollection of such a memorandum from Barnes, nor was such a memorandum found among CIA's records.<sup>6</sup> The only evidence attributable specifically to Barnes that has been recovered is a memorandum that he wrote more than two years after the event in response to the criticism of his briefing of Stevenson that appeared in *Invisible Government*.<sup>7</sup> Barnes wrote:

Although Stevenson did not know me well, we had known each other slightly for a good twenty years, and there was no doubt in his mind as to my association with CIA—in fact, the briefing had been announced to him as a CIA briefing.

*I told him about the then status of the operation in detail. I also explained to him that as of this date, it was impossible to state whether or not, such an operation would ever take place, since the final decision was entirely in the President's hands, and he had not yet made up his mind.* I did state that the President had called a meeting for 12 April, for another review of the entire matter, and it was possible that he would announce a decision after, or shortly following, this meeting. My recollection is that I did not mention to Stevenson the air raid which occurred on Saturday, 15 April, since this plan, as I recollect it, was not worked out until after the briefing. I did, however, explain to him in some detail not only the essentiality of achieving the control of the air, but also a number of the air proposals which had been made, including those which had as of 8 April, been turned down. If it is important, I could check the matter of the 15 April raid. If my recollection is faulty and the plan for this raid had been completed on 8 April, I would have told it to Stevenson, since I told him all the significant aspects of the invasion plans then in effect, or under consideration. . . .

*Stevenson, a week later, following the 15 April raid sent a message to the Secretary of State and the DCI, saying that I had given him an inaccurate assurance on one point, i.e., that no invasion would occur while the Cuban matter was before the UN. What I did say, was that no invasion would occur prior to, or during, Roa's presentation on Monday, 10 April.* I said this because at that time, after the delays mentioned above, Roa was definitely expected to make his postponed attack on the floor of the UN on 10 April, and it was so scheduled. Obviously I could have said nothing else in view of my other statements that no decision of any kind existed as to the invasion, and that nothing could be known prior to the Wednesday, 12 April meeting called by the President. In fact, at the time the Stevenson message was not taken in the least seriously.<sup>8</sup> \*

\* The provenance of the document from which this quotation is taken has not been determined. It is a Xerox copy from miscellaneous files collected by (b)(3)(c) but neither the original nor a carbon copy was recovered. It is impossible to determine whether the emphasis shown in the quotation came from Barnes or was added by someone else. The copy also reflects at least one grammatical change and two spelling corrections which may or may not be part of the original. Barnes wrote the memorandum to a Special Assistant to the DDP.

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According to Hugh Thomas, Stevenson's remembrance of the briefing was that it left something to be desired:

Tracy Barnes of the CIA came up and briefed us here on the delegation. . . . He assured us that this was simply a question of helping the exiles and this was not in any way a US operation. In light of what happened, I suppose this can be regarded as less than candid.<sup>9</sup>

As for his comments about setting the date for the D-2 strike, Barnes himself had been involved in promoting such action as early as January 1961, and the need for a pre-D-Day strike had been generally accepted by mid-to-late March. By 1 April when it was anticipated that D-Day would be 10 April, the cable traffic between the air base in Puerto Cabezas and Headquarters indicated that the briefing team that came from Headquarters should be prepared to brief on 4 April, with 5 April being reserved for coordination of air/ground and maritime operations. The briefings were to be completed by the night of 5 April at the latest.<sup>10</sup>

The briefing team was delayed, because in the period from 4-6 April, the President and his White House staff were still discussing the merits of a pre-D-Day strike with representatives of CIA, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and State. By the morning of 6 April, the pre-D-Day defection/deception strike had been approved, and Barnes should have included this information in his briefing for Stevenson. Inasmuch as Barnes did not depart Washington until Saturday, 8 April—the day he briefed Stevenson—there is no way that Barnes could have been ignorant of the decision to launch air strikes on both D-2 and D-Day.\*

Two of the principal officers of the anti-Castro task force considered Barnes at best a questionable choice to send to New York. (b)(3)(c)  
(b)(3)(c)

We were very unhappy when Dick [Bissell] sent Tracy up to brief. . . . We understood the Ivy League ties involved in this . . . but we didn't really feel that Tracy understood it well enough himself to brief anybody. . . . (b)(3)(c) and I . . . were quite disturbed about this because it was so important at that time—that this guy knew exactly what the hell we were talking about. We just didn't think that Tracy really understood it that well, or if Tracy did, . . . he wouldn't articulate it that well.<sup>11</sup>

That view regarding Barnes was compatible with the opinion of (b)(3)(c)  
(b)(3)(c) who remarked:

Knowing Tracy, I've always had severe doubt that Tracy made it very clear to the Ambassador. Now he was sent up there to make clear to him . . . the whole works . . . I think Tracy, dealing with Adlai—in a way they were two of a type—dealt with him, probably

(b)(6) and other members of the briefing team for the air strikes began their briefings at Puerto Cabezas on 10 April. They probably departed Washington on 9 April. The target folders and briefing aids would have been completed days earlier in all probability. On 8 April, Barnes departed Washington on Northeast Airlines flight 106 at 0745; he returned on a Northeast flight departing New York at 2215 hours that same day.

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the way, just intuitively, Tracy dealt with everyone—very pleasantly, kind of elliptically, lots of smiling and graciousness, interjection of completely non-connected events, shook hands, laughed, and said what a great time he'd had; and came back and announced that he had briefed the Ambassador. . . . That was the form that Tracy would customarily employ. What Adlai Stevenson needed, not that it would necessarily have done any good, was the worst case presentation of what was going to happen.<sup>12</sup>

Examination of the cable traffic between the USUN Mission and the Secretary of State following the D-2 air strike makes clear that Stevenson accepted the deception story at face value, and was unaware that the attacks on Castro's airfields had been conducted by the Agency-sponsored brigade. In his statement of 15 April in response to the Cuban complaint, Stevenson was aware of the fact that Roberto Verdaguer and his brother, Guillermo, both officers in Castro's FAR, had defected on 14 April in a Cubana cargo aircraft and had landed at Jacksonville, Florida. This was on the day prior to the D-2 air strike.<sup>13</sup>

The authentic defection of the Verdaguer brothers may have caused some problems during the subsequent discussions concerning the planned D-Day air strike. After cabling the Secretary of State about Jose Miro Cardona's 15 April statement for the Cuban Revolutionary Council—which was addressed to members of the UN and which repeated the deception story—the USUN Mission then cabled Secretary Rusk that:

Miro Cardona statement (US/UN Telegram 2877) given to only a few UN delegates . . . Cuban Revolutionary Council depending on press to give ample publicity so that all UN delegates will have been informed of statement before resumption debates Monday. Recommend USIA give full publicity.<sup>14</sup>

If Stevenson had believed that he was playing with the hot potato of a deception operation, it is unlikely that such a message would have been forwarded to the Secretary of State; and it is inconceivable that Stevenson would have followed that cable with another—also received by the Department early in the morning of 16 April—reading:

Confirming TELECON request to ARA for use in Cuban debate, desire urgently on Sunday [16 April]: 1) Revolutionary background of Verdaguer brothers. 2) Detailed info on Cuban acquisition and possession of defecting FAR B-26's which will serve to discredit Roa's statement that it is easy to paint up aircraft to look like FAR plane.<sup>15</sup>

Shortly after 7:30 p.m. on 16 April a high priority cable for the Secretary of State and Allen Dulles from Stevenson was received in the State Department; and it makes clear that the Ambassador was ignorant of the US role in the D-2 air strikes. The cable stated:

1. Greatly disturbed by clear indications received during day in process developing rebuttal material that bombing incidents in Cuba on Saturday [15 April] were launched, in part at least, from outside Cuba.



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2. *I had definite impression from Barnes when he was here that no action would be taken which could give US political difficulty during current UN debate.* This raid, if such it was, if exposed will gravely alter whole atmosphere in GA. If Cuba now proves any of planes and pilots came from outside, we will face increasingly hostile atmosphere. No one will believe that bombing attacks on Cuba from outside could have been organized without our complicity.

3. I do not understand how we could let such attack take place two days before debate on Cuban issue in GA. Nor can I understand if we could not prevent such outside attack from taking place at this time why I could not have been warned and provided pre-prepared material with which to defend US. Answers I made on Saturday were hastily concocted in Department and revised by me at last minute on assumption this was a clear case of attacks by defectors inside Cuba.

4. There is gravest risk of another U-2 disaster in such uncoordinated action.<sup>16</sup>

About this same time, the Department received another priority cable from Stevenson for the President and Secretary Rusk asking for guidance to meet the Soviet charge that armed attacks against Cuba were being launched from the United States. He requested authority to go on record as favoring the motivation of the Cuban refugees in the US who were anti-Castro, but: "I wish to make clear, however, that we would be opposed to any use of our territory for mounting an offensive against any foreign government." An advance copy of this message went to Rusk at 9:15 p.m. on Sunday, 16 April 1961.<sup>17</sup>

That Stevenson was in the dark regarding details of the planned anti-Castro operation also is supported by various individuals involved with the Ambassador during the crisis. Correspondence with some of those who were present during the Barnes briefing and the crisis following the D-2 strike reveals that Barnes did not, in any way, provide details about the anticipated tactical air operations—neither objectives nor dates—or about the deception activity. Barnes apparently did indicate that there was an upcoming invasion, but none of those in attendance at the briefing recalled any mention of numbers of troops or the date for D-Day.

In response to specific inquiries about his remark that the briefing for Stevenson "was probably unduly vague" Arthur Schlesinger wrote:

I have checked my journal with the following result. I had an appointment with Dean Rusk on the morning of April 8, 1961 (in a vain effort to get him to oppose the Cuban adventure), and for that reason was late in setting off for New York. I now quote the journal:

"I then took a plane to New York. I went immediately to the office of the US Delegation to the UN. Tracy Barnes (CIA) and Bill Bowdler (State) had preceded me and were already deep in discussion with AES about a proposed response to Roa. We discussed aspects of this most of the morning. Then, AES, Harlan Cleveland, Clayton Fritchey, and I went to the Century for luncheon. AES made it clear

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that he wholly disapproves of the project, and objects to the fact that he was given no opportunity to comment on it, and believes that it will cause infinite trouble. However, he is substantially the good soldier about it, and is prepared to try and make the best possible US case."

As I recall it, Tracy Barnes was to provide the detailed tactical briefing and *this presumably had been accomplished by the time of my arrival*. Perhaps Bill Bowdler may recall what Tracy in fact told Stevenson. Looking at your four points, I would say that Stevenson certainly understood No. 2 [that there would be a D-Day invasion by anti-Castro troops] . . . But I assume that Tracy had said something to him about your points 1 [that there would be a D-2 air strike] and 3 [that there would be a D-Day air strike]; and that we did not make point 4 [the specific date of either D-day or D-2] clear to Stevenson, leaving him under the impression, as I wrote in *A Thousand Days*, that the invasion would not take place while the Cuban item was under discussion at the UN. I do not know why Stevenson was not informed more precisely about the date. It was probably because the date had not been finally set in Washington, and we supposed that that question could be faced farther down the road.<sup>18</sup>

Based on the previously discussed cable traffic from the USUN New York to the Department of State following the D-2 strike, Schlesinger's assumptions regarding Barnes's briefing D-2 and D-Day were in error. If D-2 was mentioned, it is hard to imagine that it was mentioned in any context other than that it was to be carried out by the CIA-trained, anti-Castro pilots. Thus any references that Stevenson picked up about the 15 April strike should have recalled the session with Barnes. As already mentioned, the D-2 date had been set by the morning of 6 April, two days prior to the Barnes-Schlesinger trip to USUN New York.

Because Schlesinger missed part of Barnes's briefing, Richard F. Pedersen, then Chief of the Political Section, of the USUN Mission was queried about the meeting. Pedersen wrote:

I was present with Amb. Stevenson and Amb. [Francis T. P.] Plimpton in the briefings by Tracy Baines [sic] (and Arthur Schlesinger) in 1961. . . .

In fact, the briefing totally misled Amb. Stevenson, Amb. Plimpton, and me as to the scope and timing of what was underway. The effect of the briefing was this:

- 1) That the CIA was involved in plans for an internal uprising on the island. (This had to have included mention of outside Cuban assistance though I do not now remember this as a fact.)
- 2) That nothing would happen from US territory.
- 3) That no US forces or personnel would be involved.

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4) That whatever happened would have the appearance of an internal Cuban event.

5) That nothing would happen during the session of the General Assembly, then underway. (I asked this question myself.)

There was no mention of dates; no mention of an "invasion" by a force of Cubans; no mention whatsoever of anything like a "D-Day"; no mention of US air strikes; and no mention of a date. . . .

The three key factors for us were: appearance of an internal uprising, no US participation, and nothing during the General Assembly session. I am clear about these matters, as I was responsible for our handling of the Cuban item then before the General Assembly. . . .

I was also intimately involved in the false statements of Gov. Stevenson, which he made about the two aircraft in Florida just before the invasion. It was obvious at that point that something was accelerating (although we were completely uninformed about an invasion). Nevertheless, we were fully assured from Washington that the two planes in Florida were legitimate Cuban aircraft which had defected.

I wrote the first draft to this effect myself. This was then rewritten in Washington, where it was cleared by Secretary Rusk himself and, I was told, by the responsible person in CIA. When Mr. Sisco telephoned the redraft back on Saturday morning [15 April], I commented about half way through that the draft was not a denial. Mr. Sisco said that it was and that the rest of the text would show that. It did, although it may well be that we strengthened the words on the phone.\*

I then took the text to Governor Stevenson, telling him that the Department had verified that, whatever else was happening, the two planes concerned were legitimate defecting planes of the Cuban Air Force. As we by then had pictures of these planes in New York, as well as the statements of the pilots, both of which were also legitimate if the Washington text was true, we added those elements to the statement he later made to the Committee.

As we were obviously dealing with a delicate matter on which it was important to be right, I suggested to Gov. Stevenson he verify the statement again directly with Secretary Rusk. He asked his secretary to make the call, but just at that point Mr. Sisco called him. Gov. Stevenson then verified the statement with Mr. Sisco instead, and we shortly went into the Committee where he made it. . . .

Foreign Minister Roa attacked our statement in the Committee so robustly that I began to get concerned again. Saturday afternoon I

\* Joseph Sisco was Deputy Director of the Office of UN Political and Security Affairs located in the Department of State in Washington.

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asked one of our staff members to get corroborating details on the planes—engine numbers and other data—that we could read into the record during the next debate to prove that these two planes were from the Cuban Air Force.

On Sunday morning [16 April], I was told that Washington had finally said that pursuant [sic] of that line of inquiry would not be fruitful. It was then clear that our Saturday statement had been false. I prepared a Top Secret telegram of complaint from Stevenson to the Secretary (or the President) and, accompanied by Wm. Bowdler . . . took it to Gov. Stevenson at the Waldorf. I told him the Saturday statements had been false and showed him the telegram, which he signed—probably, though I do not remember for sure, with changes of his own. He was understandably very disturbed.<sup>19</sup> \*

One of the B-26s from the D-2 raid, its pilots claiming to be Cuban defectors, had landed at the Boca Chica Naval Air Station near Key West on 15 April. Keeping the various aircraft that entered Florida's air space properly identified—Zuniga's B-26 at Miami, the battle damaged B-26 at the Boca Chica NAS, and the Cubana plane the Verdaguers landed at Jacksonville—added to the confusion about Stevenson's position. According to Schlesinger, Secretary Rusk:

seems for a while to have confused the phony defector at Key West with the authentic defector at Jacksonville. Apparently it was not until late Saturday afternoon that he understood that the Key West plan was part of the CIA plot.<sup>22</sup>

Schlesinger himself still did not understand that the Key West B-26 was not a "phony" and he seems to have been unaware that Zuniga's landing at Miami was the intended deception.

In his effort to protect the Kennedy White House, Schlesinger claimed that CIA had misled State; and "possibly the Agency having worked out its deception plan, felt obliged to deceive even the rest of its own government; or possibly the CIA source, if in the Intelligence Branch, was himself 'unwitting'."<sup>23</sup> If Schlesinger was correct in saying that on 15 April 1961 following the air strike, Harlan Cleveland contacted State's Bureau of "Interamerican Affairs" (actually the Bureau of American Republic Affairs), which in turn called the CIA, and if these inquiries went to the "Intelligence Branch" (CIA's Directorate for Intelligence), State called the wrong party.<sup>24</sup> ARA/State should have gone directly to Secretary Rusk or to CIA's Western Hemisphere Division for information on the anti-Castro project. Rusk's confusion about the three aircraft in Florida implies ineptitude on his part and on the part of his immediate staff—not deviousness on the part of CIA. Unlike Stevenson, Rusk was fully read into the operational plan, even though he would subsequently suggest to the contrary.

\* Stevenson's protest apparently did not register on Washington, for a message was sent to him on Monday, 17 April at 1213 hours providing him with "language for contingency use if Cubans make show with bomb and rocket fragments [from D-2 attack]."<sup>20</sup>

Francis T. P. Plimpton reported that he "was in complete accord with everything" that Mr. Pedersen wrote about this episode.<sup>21</sup>

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Considering that Tracy Barnes failed to provide Adlai Stevenson with the details of the operations planned to oust Castro, Stevenson was stranded in an untenable position: on center stage at the UN, in the role of defender of United States' interests, with the wrong lines to recite and without anything substantial from which to ad lib. Beyond that indignity, he has been maligned for more than twenty years with accusations that he intervened to prevent the D-Day air strike, a role he did not play. Stevenson understood the need to win the battle with Castro. Despite his personal reservations, he advocated the use of covert force to bring the operation to a successful conclusion. From within CIA, the USUN Ambassador deserves praise rather than continued censure.

*This article is classified SECRET.*

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